Innovation is No Substitute for Education

July 1, 2014 By Jason Panda

Late last year, Bill Gates announced his mission to build the "Next Generation Condom." The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation had a contest for inventors, designers and manufactures to create a new and improved condom that would increase sensation and make use easier. The theory is that if we increase condom pleasure and ease of use, more people will use them.

We have seen traditional condom companies introduce products in different textures, sizes and varieties for many years. We've seen studded condoms, sensitive condoms, thin condoms, large condoms, flavored condom, etc. We also know that when used correctly, condoms are 98 percent successful at preventing pregnancy and disease transmission. However, we still find ourselves with alarming new rates of HIV infections, an increase in certain STIs and a high number of unwanted pregnancies, especially amongst younger people. According to the Guttmacher Institute, 15 to 24 year-olds represent only one-quarter of the sexually active population, yet they account for nearly half (9.1 million) of the 18.9 million new cases of STIs each year. A sexually active teen that does not use contraceptives has a 90 percent chance of becoming pregnant within a year.

So for all the improvements in condoms, and all the bells and whistles that come with them these days, are we really getting to the root of the problem? No. Innovation is not a replacement for education. As the founder of b condoms, a socially-responsible condom company that works to promote education and prevent STIs and unwanted pregnancies among multicultural millennials, I see firsthand how the lack of education detrimentally impacts communities. A glimpse of those realities can be seen in the latest CDC (2011) report, where over 47 percent of high school students said they'd had sex at least once; 15 percent of them said they'd had four or more sexual partners in their lives; and only 60 percent of sexually active high school students said they used a condom the last time they had sex. The solution to those statistics has to be addressed in the context of comprehensive education, not mere manufacturing innovation. There is a lack of education amongst teens regarding the proper use and appropriateness of condoms.

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) in its latest study outlined much of what should be included in our education as we plan for the "Next Generation." From their report:

Pediatricians and other clinicians should actively support and encourage the consistent ad correct use of condoms as well as other reliable contraception as part of anticipatory guidance with adolescents who are sexually active or contemplating sexual activity. The responsibility of males

as well as females in preventing unintended pregnancies and STIs should be emphasized.
Schools should be considered appropriate sites for the availability of condoms because they contain large adolescent populations and may potentially provide a comprehensive array of related educational and health resources. Training of youth to improve communication skills around condom negotiation with partners can occur in school-based settings.
Pediatricians and other clinicians should actively help raise awareness among parents and communities that making condoms available to adolescents does not increase the onset or frequency of adolescent sexual activity and that use of condoms can help decrease rates of unintended pregnancy and acquisition of STIs.
Pediatricians and other clinicians should provide and support parental education programs that help parents develop communications skills with their adolescent children around prevention of STIs and proper use of condoms.
Restrictions and barriers to condom availability should be removed, given the research that demonstrates that increased availability of condoms facilitates use. Beyond retail distribution of condoms, sexually active adolescents should have ready access to condoms at free or low cost where possible.

b condoms has partnered with a number of small non-profit organizations to provide this type of comprehensive approach to education, prevention and testing. Many of these organizations are encouraged by Gates' participation in the fight, but wish that he understood that innovations in condoms means little to groups of people who lack the understanding as to why they need them in the first place.

Still, we are encouraged by Bill Gates' decision to join the community of condom advocacy. His participation in the discussion has sparked an important conversation about this topic. However, as the conversation continues, and we move into discussing new ideas for next generation condoms and work to implement strategies to increase condom usage, let's not forget that educating young people about "the birds and the bees" is still one of the most powerful weapons in the fight against poverty and disease.

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